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A
LETTER
TO A
ROYAL ACADEMICIAN,
CONTAINING
A REVIEW OF
THE
FINE ARTS IN GREECE;
Compared to their present State in England,
By JAMES ATKINSON, ESQ

Ciascun uomo, o locato in alto o in basso, dovria invigorirsi ed accendersi colla speranza di rendersi utile agli altri perfezionando quell' arte che gli tocca in sorte di esercitare. — ANON.

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1800



A

LETTER

TO A

Esq.

ROYAL ACADEMICIAN, &c.

DEAR SIR,

IT is now impossible to ascertain at what period the Fine Arts first began to illumine the world. However, it is evident, from the concurrence of reputable historians, that the ancient people of Chaldea and Phœnicia were acquainted with Design, though their representations were very confused and barbarous. The use of Sculpture may be traced to a very remote æra; for during the first ages of Society, it was the only means of recording events.—But as it is not my present purpose to enter into a minute investigation of the origin and progress of the Arts, a few general observations may be sufficient in this place. Painting and

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Literature

Literature have had a constant revolution in different parts of the globe. From Egypt and Persia, they were carried into Greece. The Greeks after flourishing many centuries, through dissipation and too great a degree of refinement, unable to resist the frequent incursions of the Romans, left in their possession all the valuable remains of *Ancient Art*. The Romans were then proud of shewing their predilection for Painting and Sculpture, and their excellence in every department of the Polite Arts, soon established their celebrity all over Europe. Enriched with such wonderful exemplars of the old masters, it is no wonder the Arts were studied and patronized with uncommon ardor. But what a melancholy and dreary retrospect we have of all the miseries attendant on treachery and infidelity, when the Roman Empire was inundated by the Northern Hordes. The Arts were then buried in Oblivion, and nothing was heard of but tumult and devastation.

vastation. From times like these, o'er-grown with ignorance and superstition, we may turn with pleasure and view the amazing progress of civilization and christianity, in succeeding ages.

THE Italians inherited all the genius and power of the Romans. The illustrious families of the Medici, &c. adorned Italy, with many stupendous works in Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, which are lasting monuments of their zeal and public spirit.

A mercenary and ferocious people who require that pungent stimulus, gold, to rouse their energies into action, will never be instrumental to any achievement great or honorable. The Greeks, so remarkably contentious and irritable, were still brave and independent; and the longer we contemplate the magnanimity and patriotism of the three hundred Lacedemonians, under LEONIDAS, in defend-
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ing the Pass at Thermopylæ,—the memorable actions at Salamis, and at Marathon, their glory is encreased and our admiration. Such an heroic spirit had diffused itself through every bosom, the Fine Arts acquired additional splendor. Born under such favourable circumstances, and familiar with the deeds of great and renowned heroes, can we wonder, should the immediate followers of such an illustrious race, be more intrepid than they were? Example, Sir, is the most powerful spur to action. But it must be confest, in our times, corruption and prejudice, have in a great measure erased from the mind, that solicitude about renown, which was the distinguishing characteristick of the Greeks; and an immoderate desire of wealth and aggrandizement, is now the popular delusion.

GREECE abounded in works of Sculpture: for in all public places, statues were erected to their gods, demi-gods, heroes, poets, legislators, and philosophers. It is
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related of Nero that he took five hundred brazen statues from the Temple at Delphos, and at Rhodes, alone were seventy three thousand in marble. Pliny observes of his time, that there were nearly as many statues as men.

At Altis in Olympia were treasured up the best productions of Dedalus, Micon, and Aristomedes : In the Temple was dedicated the Collossal statue of Jupiter by Phidias, constructed principally of ivory and gold, which has been the admiration of the whole world, for its wonderful expression and sublimity *. Even the victors in the Pancratiun, at the Olympic games, were honored with statues to commemorate their gymnastic skill and intrepidity. The description of them, in Pausanias, is very curious and interesting. In such ages so estranged from avarice and all its pernicious concomitants, an honest fame was preferred to all the
glitter

* This statue was twenty-seven feet high.

glitter of wealth ; of which, Polygnotus is an illustrious example. This celebrated Artist undertook to paint the subversion of Troy in the vestibule of the Temple at Delphi, gratis ;—so extensive a work, executed in such an admirable and masterly manner, could not fail of meriting the encomiums of all Greece. With equal veneration, I reflect on the manly and inestimable work of Mr BARRY's, in the Great Room* belonging to the Society, for the encouragement of Arts, &c. which is a proof what a great genius can accomplish, when determined to surmount all difficulties and obstacles, the almost inseperable attendants on human exertion. When the Amateur looks round this august assemblage, of all that is excellent in Art, his mind is filled with surprize and astonishment. The more he attends to the Design, Colouring, Expression ; the longer he meditates on the moral, useful precepts it contains, and the necessity of our concurrence in such important

* ADELPHI, London.

important truths, it rises in majesty and his esteem. He turns, and from Orpheus who is impressing on the savage Thracians, the cogent lessons of Theology, and Morality, follows the subject through its progress of intellectual improvement, to Elyzium, where all the most celebrated Philisophers, Painters, &c. are represented in a state of beatitude*. This series of Pictures may without hesitation, be considered the most perfect and sublime, since the sixteenth century, when so many masters flourished in Italy, under the magnificent Pontificate of Leo the X. The mind of Mr BARRY is fertile and comprehensive, and like a rich luxuriant soil, free from all noxious vegetation yields abundance of every thing the most beautiful and gratifying: In his performances,

* For an account of these admirable Paintings, See Mr Barry's various publications. They are written with energy, and are pregnant with useful information, particularly his Letter to the Dellettanti Society, printed by Walker, Paternoster Row, 1799.

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inances, we meet with all that enchanting *gusto*, so exquisitely palpable in those of the old masters, and the grandeur of Michael Angelo, is happily blended with the more fascinating elegancies of the divine Raffaele.

It is a lamentable case that the few Artists who are blest with original ideas, facility of invention, and a just and accurate knowledge of human nature, equal to display with energy and precision, the various passions of the soul, should too often be in want of that protection, which their merit so justly entitles them to:—while by some unluckly fatality, those from whence encouragement should proceed, usually and injudiciously select the most mercenary and ignoble wretches to receive their prostituted favours. Yet, the favourites of such individuals can excite no envy. The depravity of taste among the affluent is the evident cause of that disgraceful insensibility, which
takes

takes from them the power of discrimination.—For when once the mind loses the sense of its own dignity and importance; it likewise loses the ability of distinguishing them in another. Pope justly observes:—

All seem infected that the infected spy,
As all look yellow thro' the jaundic'd eye.

UNDER this perversion of intellect the most consummate sycophant, will have the ascendancy over the ignorance and folly of these, wou'd-be connoisseurs. But to return to Polygnotus.

AT Athens in a porch called VARIOUS were several Paintings by the Thasian Artist. In one piece, Theseus is represented fighting with the Amazons, who of all women, could never be terrified by any calamity of war*, or restrained from fresh engagements. A race so heroical-

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Pausanias.

ly enterprizing, firm and vigorous in every effort to restore Antiope to her native country, whom Theseus had ravished and secretly stolen away required even the utmost energy and fortitude of the Athenians to repel their attacks. Rage, resentment, and every passion that moves the soul to revenge, might be delineated in the countenance and action of Hippolyte, the sister of Antiope, and the magnanimous defender of her cause. What a fine opportunity here offered for displaying a lively and original genius, in all its varied luxuriance; and such was that of Polygnotus. In another, the Kings are collected together on account of Ajax's daring conduct to the unhappy Cassandra. Her amiable yet pensive aspect, would be finely contrasted with the stern moroseness of Ajax, whose rough savage nature suffered him to drag her from the sacred altar of Minerva. Virgil thus describes the affecting scene.

Behold the royal Prophetess, the fair
Cassandra, dragg'd by her dishevell'd hair,

Whom

Whom not Minerva's shrine nor sacred bands
In safety could protect from sacrilegious hands.

THE subject matter of this piece, must have excited a deep interest in the minds of all, who fully considered its import. But reflection only makes us regret that these noble performances are now no more. Every production of Apelles, Parrhasius, Zeuxis, and Protogenes, having unfortunately met with the same fate, nothing remains but the bare description of them, as handed down to us by historians.

FEW performances of the present day can bear the most distant comparison with those of the ancients. Though we have amongst us many Artists of extraordinary attainments and various erudition, yet we want Alexanders, Augustus's, and such illustrious Patrons—so ardent for their encouragement, as Francis the I. Charles the V. and Julius the II. who began the inimitable work of the Vatican
by

by Raffaele, and that of the Sistene Chapel by M. Angelo. The great, having so much in their power, so peculiarly circumstanced for encouraging the love of Science, it is to be lamented that such immense sums should be thrown away on mere temporary amusements, which had they been applied to some laudable, patriotic purpose, would instead of disgrace, have reflected honor on their posterity. Here I cannot help adverting to a circumstance on which I never reflect but with sorrow and indignation:—Poor Chatterton might have been rescued from an untimely grave, by the interposition of a few generous, sympathising friends; but with feelings the most exquisite, and conscious of his own merit, he was disgusted with the world's neglect. His short but eventful life, affords a melancholy instance, of complicated misery.

Ah! who wou'd bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressors wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The

The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes !—”

To enumerate all the villainous artifices, couched under the pretensions of patronage, would be endless. The treatment of the Cardinal Farnese to Annibale Carracci, is too infamous to be passed over with common censure. For after having bestowed eight years study and labour in perfectionating a work * which has immortalized his name, that arrogant Ecclesiastic with the most disgraceful and unparralelled parsimony, gave him little more than L.200. At this disappointment poor Annibale lost his former vivacity, and the latter part of his days was spent in poverty and distress. Correggio, equally unfortunate, died of a broken heart. But to you, Sir, who are acquainted with their Memoirs and can consult VASARI at your leisure, it would be superfluous here, to say any
more

* The Farnese Gallery at Rome.

more on the subject. I shall therefore turn to the uses and abuses of Painting.

As medicines in the hands of skillful physicians are of sovereign benefit to the afflicted, and are attended with salutary effects; so pictures in the support of virtue, by their purity of design, are morally instructive; but when as incitements to vice, they are of the most pernicious and destructive tendency. They inflame the desire and raise in the mind the most lewd and meretricious ideas: For as Horace says,—

“ Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem,
Quam que sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus *.”

To the disgrace of Painting we have too many who indulge this flagitious propensity. The contagion will increase and
ramify.

* what we hear,
With weaker passion will affect the heart,—
Than when the faithful eye beholds the part.
Francis's translation.

ramify, if not arrested in its progress by some efficacious remedy. Hogarth perhaps was as fine a moralist as ever exercised the pencil; but his works are too much calculated to excite risibility, instead of touching the heart, though they happily illustrate the axiom of Pope.

Vice to be hated, needs but to be seen.

WHAT Hippocrates says of medicine, may be admirably applied to painting. "Life is so short," he says, "the study of it should be begun in earliest youth. Have you a pupil you would educate for the practice of medicine, examine leisurely whether his genius be adapted to the Art. Has he received from nature an exquisite discernment, a sound judgment, a character in which mildness and firmness are combined, the love of labour and an inclination to what is praise-worthy? If so you may entertain well-founded hopes. He must

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preserve in his manners an incorruptible purity, &c.”

THE vitiated taste which predominates so glaringly in countenancing, the licentious productions of some Painters, is much to be regretted. It is observed by Burke in his Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, that, “Sensibility and Judgment, which are the qualities, that compose what is commonly called Taste, vary exceedingly in various people. From a defect in the former of these qualities, arises a want of Taste: a weakness in the latter, constitutes a wrong or a bad one.”

* Hogarth was a painter of very uncommon abilities, and keenly satirical. His contest with Churchill was warm, and his caricatures of that poet whimsically ludicrous. There is certainly a species of sublimity attached even to his humorous

*Of late his works have been shockingly *mangled* by Ireland and Cooke, who at extravagant prices issue editions of them, which are *modestly* announced to be equal to the originals.

inourous works. But in the higher regions of the the Art, the grand and the pathetic, he was never known to move with honor.

You, Sir, always feel a glow of enthusiasm at the sight of noble and masterly performances.—I remember with what a generous sympathy, you dwelt upon every part of that spirited picture, of the LAZAR-HOUSE, in the Milton Gallery, by Fuseli.

Demoniac phrenzy, moaping melancholy,
And moonstruck madness, pining atrophy,
Marasmus and wide-wasting pestilence,
Dropsies and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums,
Dire was the tossing, deep the groans; Despair
Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch:
And over them triumphant Death, his dart
Shook, but delay'd to strike.

As Dr. Smith in his notes to Longinus, observes: we startle and groan at this scene of miseries, in which the whole race of mankind is perpetually involved,

volved, and of some of which we ourselves must one day be the victims. Mr Fuseli has represented it with great judgment and skill. He wishes to tread in the footsteps of M. Angelo, and in this instance he has not been unsuccessful. The *tout ensemble* has an astonishing effect and fills the mind with an awful and serious emotion. The attitudes are well deversified, and the colouring inconceivably fine. His figures of Satan, have in them all that horrible majesty, described by the Poet—

—he above the rest

In shape and gesture proudly eminent
 Stood like a tower ; his form had not yet lost
 All her original brightness, nor appear'd
 Less than Arch-angel ruin'd, and th' excess
 Of Glory obscur'd.

—but his face

Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care
 Sat on his faded cheek, but under brows
 Of dauntless courage, and considerate pride,
 Waiting revenge : cruel his eye.

Yet what pencil can express the sub-
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limity and horror, of the following description of death?

—black it stood as night
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell,
And shook a dreadful dart.

Again,

The monster moving onward came as fast,
With horrid srides, hell trembled as he strode.

FUSELI who seems to take such delight in painting these scenes of terror, could never exhibit on canvass, so dreadful an image of the grizly king. What he has done, certainly does credit to his talents: and though you look upon the late President, as unequalled by any contemporary Artist, you must own many of his pictures are even inferior in point of design and expression, to some of these in the Milton Gallery.

WHAT Sir Joshua Reynolds constantly and strenuously inforces in his discourses, delivered at the Royal Academy,

my, appears to me irreconcilable with truth. It is this, " That by exertion alone, every excellence of whatever kind, *even taste and genius itself* might be acquired." Though Locke totally denies the existence of any innate principle, I conceive genius can never be acquired, even by the most incessant application and industry, without (as Fresnoy expresses it,) our being endued with some portion of that celestial fire, which Prometheus stole from heaven. Sir J. was certainly exemplary in unwearied exertion, but I cannot pay that implicit veneration to his character, which some affect to do. I am far from thinking him (pardon my candour) so great as he is represented. His style of painting, was directly opposite to that which he recommends in his writings; it is Rembrandts, pure and unsophisticated. Though he applauds M. Angelo with enthusiasm, and in his last discourse, asserts, had he then to begin his studies, he would set out

out with imitating that wonderful Artist ; yet nothing could be more incompatible with their dispositions, Sir Joshua's being mild and amiable, that of M. Anglo's, stern, irascible, and contentious. Sir J. was unquestionably a fine Painter, but not so, to merit that indiscriminate praise, which is generally lavished upon his works. I speak from the consideration of them alone : but unfortunately for this country, his best and most perfect historical work, the infant Hercules strangling the Serpents, was painted for the late Empress of Russia. As many excellencies, were united in that admirable performance, it ought to have been preserved among us, for obvious reasons, instead of being sent to that cold, unsociable clime, where even civilization is in its infancy.

SIR Joshua possessed a lively sense of the superiority of the ancients. A judicious writer observes, " To imitate faithfully

fully their model, and at the same time embellish it, and thus to unite truth and beauty, was the grand principle of the Grecian Artists, and the fundamental rule they followed in their productions." The Grecians no doubt, had sublime ideas of the human figure, but it is to the moderns I attribute, the want of taste to determine the bounds of a beautiful *contour*. As so much depends on the ability of the Artist, by deviating from nature, in attempting to improve her, he may descend into extravagance, and burlesque what was intended to be great and exemplary. He will in this case, be in the situation of Ulysses, steering between Scylla and Charybdis. To touch either side, would be equally fatal.

I never could contemplate the famous statue of Laocoon without admiration. Yet it has met with much undeserved censure, from many eminent men. Fresnoy contends that it ought to have been
clothed,

clothed. For what likelihood is there (says he) that the son of a King, and a Priest of Apollo, should appear naked in the actual ceremony of a sacrifice*. De Piles, says that the workmen thought the piece would have appeared like a heap of stones, and so avoided the less inconvenience. Then Lamotte gives his opi-

D nion

* Virgil who took his fine episode in the Eneid, from this Statue, says, "Laocoon was Neptune's Priest," It is too long to quote, but the beauty of the following lines, translated by Dryden, will be a sufficient apology for my inserting them here.

"Two serpents rank'd abreast the seas divide,
And smoothly sweep along the swelling tide,
Their flaming crests above the waves they show,
Their bellies seem to burn the waves below:—
Their nimble tongues they brandish'd as they came,
And lick'd their hissing jaws that sputter'd flame,
We fled amaz'd; their destin'd way they take,
And to Laocoon and his children make,
And first around the tender boys they wind,
Then with their fangs their limbs and bodies grind,
The *wretched father* running to their aid,
With pious haste, but vain, they next invade,
Twice round his waist, their winding volumes roll'd,
And twice about his gasping throat they fold."

nion, that the Sculptors had done better not to have made it at all, than to have committed so great and palpable an absurdity. But in these times the rigid authors must have known, it was the custom*. In Homer, do we not read of a Princess bathing the naked limbs of Telemachus? And centuries after that, the renowned Sophocles, gave the example to his fellow-citizens, of dancing naked in the public theatre at Athens, as likewise did young virgins, on certain festivals, in presence of all Greece†. It was not then thought indelicate.—

Then was not guilty shame, dishonest shame
Of natures works, honour dishonourable,
Sin bred, how have ye troubled all mankind
With shows instead mere shows of seeming pure,
And banish'd from man's life his happiest life,
Simplicity, and spotless innocence.

THE Rhodian Artists, Agesander, Polydore, and Athenodorus, were willing to risk the censures of the ignorant and the

* Pliny says, *græca res est nihil velare.*

† Vide Winkleman on Painting, &c.

the envious, rather than forego such an opportunity of displaying their astonishing skill, to admiring posterity. The attitude of Laocoon is full of sublimity. The soul shines forth in the countenance, with a calm fortitude, under the most excruciating bodily torment. The muscles which are marked with truth and precision, indicate the most poignant anguish. His sons, torn with conflicting passions, are overwhelmed with horror, and the poison of the serpents, seems to be infused through all their veins. What an elevation of character ! What majesty and grandeur ! and withal, what animation appears in this inimitable group. In the time of Pliny, this statue was in the palace of the Emperor Titus, and lately in the Belvidere at Rome, but now in the Louvre at Paris. It is esteemed the finest *antique* which has escaped the wreck of time. The Venus de Medici, for beauty and grace, so transcendently eminent, baffles all competition. The

Artist could not possibly have been furnished with a living model of such consummate symmetry, so he must have worked from one which existed only in his own imagination. The immortal Raffaele, sensible of this, gave to his famous Picture of Galatia, the sublime proportions of an *Ideal Beauty* *. Ariosto has given us a noble description of Alcina, the enchantress †; and has heightened it with great judgment and delicacy.

Her matchless person every charm combin'd,
 Form'd in th' idea of a Painters mind,
 Bound in a knot behind, her ringlets roll'd
 Down her soft neck, and seem'd like waving gold,
 Her cheeks with lilies mix the blushing rose :
 Her forehead high like polished ivory shows,
 Beneath two circling brows with splendor shone
 Her sparkling eyes, each eye a radiant sun !
 Here artful glances, winning looks appear,
 And wanton cupids lie in ambush here ;
 'Tis hence he bends his bow, he points his dart,
'Tis

* See his Letter to Count Balthazar Castiglioni, in Vasari.

† Orlando Furioso, Book VII.

'Tis hence he steals th' unwary gazers heart,
 Her nose so truly shap'd, the faultless frame
 Not envy can deface, or art can blame.
 Her lips beneath, with pure vermilion bright,
 Present two rows of orient pearl to sight :
 Here those soft words are form'd whose pow'r detains
 The obdurate soul in loves alluring chains ;
 And here the smiles receive their infant birth
 Whose sweets reveal a paradise on earth.
 Her neck and brest were white as falling snows ;
 Round was her neck and full her bosom rose.
 Firm as the budding fruit with gentle swell,
 Each lovely breast alternate rose and fell ;—
 Thus on the margin of the peaceful seas,
 The waters heave before the fanning breeze ;
 Her arms well-turn'd and of a dazzling hue,
 With *perfect beauty* gratify'd the view ;
 Her taper fingers long and fair to see,
 From ev'ry rising vein and swelling free ;
 And from her vest below with new delight,
 Her slender foot attracts the lovers sight ;
 Not argus' self her other charms could spy,
 So closely veil'd from every human eye ;
 Yet may we judge the graces she reveal'd
 Surpass'd not those her modest garb conceal'd,
 Which strove in vain from fancy's eye to hide,
 Each angel charm, which seem'd to heav'n ally'd.

Longinus says the proportions of the
Little

Little Soldier of Polycletus, were so finely observ'd, that Lyssippus professed he had learned all his Art, from the study and imitation of it. As you are so firm an advocate for the moderns, and think so lightly of the old Grecian models, I shall conclude this short Essay with the observations of Winkleman, who contends, " that the imitation of the ancients is the shortest way to perfection in the Fine Arts: first, because we have few opportunities of observing nature in her most graceful, elegant, and sublime aspects: and secondly, because we see the beauties, that are scattered far and wide through the extensive domain of nature, gathered together and drawn within a narrow compass, in their masterly productions, and perceive at the same time how a bold genius, directing however a prudent hand, may embellish nature and raise her, if I may be allowed the expression, above herself. An artist will be taught by this imitation to think nobly, and to execute without

out anxiety or diffidence, as he will find in the works of the ancients, the limits marked out with perspicuity and precision which separate *actual* from *ideal beauty*."

I am, &c.

J. A.

Aug. 1. }
1800. }

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* * The preceding Letter being the First
of a Series on the Fine Arts, a Second
is intended to be published as early as
possible.

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